

Desire and Disenchantment in Gautier's "Arria Marcella" and Anstey's "Siren"

This paper couples two sharply contrasting writers, one French and one British, to whom the Pygmalion motif was important. They had recourse to it over sustained periods, and in several substantial works. After *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835–36) and *Le roman de la momie* (1857), by Théophile Gautier, came *The Tinted Venus* (1885) and *A Statue at Large* (1911), by Thomas Anstey Guthrie (writing as "F. Anstey"). Yet the short fiction with which these longer works are in each case continuous offers, within the same mythologizing or classicizing framework, an even more notable—because more concentrated—exploration of desire.

The two "contes" on which the focus falls here are Gautier's "Arria Marcella," published in a single issue of the *Revue de Paris* in March 1852, and Anstey's "The Siren," published in a single issue of *The Graphic* in July 1882. The juxtaposition should conduce to the further development of what I have already ventured (in *Victorian Poetry*, 45.362–66) on "Arria Marcella" alone, since each story deals with a young man enthralled. Gautier sets his story in the ruins of Pompeii, and Anstey's is set on a remote island. Having thus transported his protagonist to a place and time partitioned off from the flow of ordinary life, each author shows him seized there by "une passion impossible et folle." Both stories then end with the breaking of that spell. Among the questions that they raise for the reader are: is desire necessarily narcissistic? and does either of the resolutions offer that "belated lucidity" which comes, as Girard would have it, from the renouncing of obsession?